

Strangest Are These by frogfarm

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Summary:

Barb fights, and lives to tell the tale.

Strangest Are These

Author's Note:

Post-"The Weirdo on Maple Street" with some changes.

Very minor and incredibly vague spoilers for S2.

strange new world

Somehow, Barb gets away.

She has no idea how. Or where, or any of the rest of the things they teach you to ask in Journalism. All she knows is that she screamed and struggled and fought, and then she ran until she couldn't.

Her breath comes quick and ragged but the panic is starting to ebb, enough to clinically observe herself noting a series of little details in quick succession. She can't believe her glasses are still on her face, but there's a clearish smear of something across one lens. Her hands tremble as she removes them, trying to wipe it clean with her shirttail. The left leg of her jeans is torn open in four stripes; by some miracle, the skin beneath untouched.

She's not sure where the light is coming from, because there has to be some, because how else can she be seeing any of this? But there's no trace of any moon in the sky, not a hint of a breeze in the air. The entire landscape lies shrouded in shadow, twisted trees and shrubbery covered in moss that hang down from them in great, grey streamers. The air is thick with bits of gossamer, drifting in a silent dance; beautiful yet somehow sinister.

And all around, the faint sounds of slithering.

stranger in a strange land

When it catches up to her she's ready to fight or die trying. No way in Hell is she going to end up as this thing's dinner. Except she forgot

just how very terrifying that near-faceless maw can be when you're looking down the business end, frozen as it rushes toward her smooth and clacking, all midnight-black and leathery oil-slick flesh. Then rage boils up inside like lava and she braces herself to meet it head on with all her strength, slamming the entire weight of herself against its surprisingly spindly frame. She manages to drive it back a few steps, barely holding the snapping teeth at bay. But her grip is failing, and she's just thinking it's all over now when a far-off roar makes the ground beneath her quiver and buck like a jello shot on an epileptic's serving tray.

The thing whips its head around, sniffing the air, blindly staring off into the distance.

An unholy scream nearly shatters her in two. Her ears aren't ringing, they're a whole goddamn orchestra but it only makes her push harder, grind the tiny nailfile back and forth, trying to penetrate further into the bastard's own head.

A tree trunk meets her chest. Then she's hitting something else, sprawling in the muck, barely aware of having lost hold of her only weapon. Guttural howls echo all around as she struggles to sit up, instinctively scrambling further backward, away from whatever the hell it is. The thing throws its head back and shrieks at the empty sky, fingers nearly as long as her forearm clutching the wounded side of its bulbous head.

She's weighing further attack against immediate retreat, on the verge of decision when her adversary turns in what she thinks is the direction of that other sound. And just when she's about to go for it in true kamikaze style, it breaks into a run. Away, away from her. And that's all that matters.

Until that other thing finds her.

estranged

She keeps having crazy notions of tracking its movement patterns or hunting schedule, but it seems pointless with no solar cycles or even

a watch. More to the point, she's had to pee twice, and more since. She's losing fluids, and every Girl Scout knows that dehydration is a problem long before starvation. Not that she couldn't stand to lose a few pounds, and then she nearly weeps at the sudden memory of girls sniggering in the locker room; of Nancy and Steve passionately exploring each other's bodies as the monster rose up behind her, taking her before she could scream.

Her sense of direction is beyond hopeless, what with perpetual night and her hasty retreat that left no time to mark a trail. She passes over two stagnant and brackish pools before a third looks safe enough to smell. It doesn't smell like anything, so she spends the next ten minutes or so letting her hands sink into the soil at its edge, letting moisture seep into her fingertips, steeling herself for some sort of acid or mutant piranha. Eventually nothing happens long enough that she risks a quick dip of her hands in the pool itself. The chill cuts near to the bone, making her mouth feel even more parched, imagining that keenness slicing through the desert on her tongue. She forces herself to wait long moments, envisioning dirt settling to the bottom.

When she finally drinks, it's not exactly sweet, but it's far from sour. She forces herself to go slow. Just her luck that thing comes back when she's got cramps --

Oh, shit.

stranger danger

Luckily, she hasn't actually started her period. But now she's paranoid because it's been about that long, and who knows if this thing -- she still hasn't come up with a good name for it -- can smell blood? After all, it first appeared when she cut her hand on that stupid beer can, and that's exactly the kind of creepy shit that would totally make sense for something like this. Something where the whole point is: *Nothing like this.*

Everything around her looks unsafe, and there's not enough light to see if more light would make it look better or worse. The pangs in her stomach are becoming harder to ignore, near painful in their

insistence. Still, she falls asleep for a few minutes, or thinks she does. Because there's a memory of a girl's face, hair cropped so close to the skull it may as well be shaved, staring with eyes that see right through her.

She shakes her head and moves to get up, stopping to stretch when she feels it coming on. Too late, and the cramp seizes her toe and runs up her calf in a red-hot line. Nothing she wants more than to scream her heart out and Barb holds on tight to her foot, rocking back and forth, choking back the tiny whimpers that try to leak their way out of her.

Later, the pain subsides enough for her to rise. Her first steps are tentative, and she pulls her tattered coat tighter around her shivering body. Then she stops and sits back down, easing her sneakers off and closely examining the soles. Last thing she needs is a hole letting in God only knows what kind of nasty infectious things. Bad enough she has to breathe this crap.

Five minutes later she's wearing a makeshift bandana over her mouth and nose, made from the bottom third of her shirt. She starts out heading away from the pool, continuing in what feels like a rough circle. Assuming nothing else out of the ordinary, she should end up where she started.

Eventually.

people are strange

She comes into the clearing and stops what feels very much dead in her tracks. Because there's something in the middle of the clearing, something that reminds her of a ramshackle hut made of sticks and old boards and she *knows* this thing despite its alien construction of bone and fur, web and antler. But she can't remember, can't think with the roar of the beast right behind. She stands frozen, indecision rooting her to the fetid earth.

Then a blanket swings aside, revealing an opening. And standing there in muddy T-shirt and jeans, looking as terrified as her, is the

missing boy everyone's looking for.

"Come on!" he shouts.

Plainly desperate, yet clearly afraid to set foot outside the safety of his dwelling. She doesn't see how it can possibly offer protection; not from a single human bully, certainly not from what's after them. But she's running, stumbling, trusting blindly as sobs catch in her throat and she makes it across the threshold, falling to her knees in a single gasping intake of breath that shudders back out of her with all the pent-up and agonized passion of these past few hours, or days. Lifetimes.

The boy pulls the blanket back over the doorway, staring intently out into the clearing beyond. She can hear the thing at the edge of the woods, its lumbering shuffle making it all too easy to envision. But the noises are growing fainter, moving away from them, and she breathes a little easier when she can no longer discern its footsteps.

"You're Nancy's friend."

"Oh." He's finally looking at her, Barb realizes. His face wears all the normal doubt and mistrust that befits their age and gender gap, made worse by the sickly pallor cast upon them by the unseen source of light. "Yeah, and -- you're Mike's."

"Yeah." But he's definitely shivering, seemingly out of proportion to his surroundings. "Are you cold?"

Will huddles in on himself, wrapping both arms around his chest.

"He likes it cold."

She strips off her jacket before she can reconsider, enveloping him in it over his objections. His eyes flicker down to her bare midriff and away, and she represses her first smile since coming here. No sense in humiliating her only ally.

"Barb," she offers. "Holland."

"Will Byers." He offers a hand, and she accepts, again fighting a smile at his overly serious air.

"How did you --" She looks around, taking in the secondhand furniture rescued from countless trash days, drawings on the walls scribbled in crayon. "How did *we* get here? Where are we?"

"I don't know. It's like...the Night Land." She can hear the capital letters in Will's voice. "Like in Dungeons and Dragons. It's a mirror world. But dark, and...twisted."

She fights down the shiver walking over her skin. "How do we get back?"

"I don't know." Will swallows and shakes his head. "If we were in the Astral Plane, then our bodies would still be in the real world. But I think we're really here."

The serious look in his eye isn't as amusing this time.

"And they're looking for us there."

strange days

The sky in the Night Land does have cycles of a sort, or at least something that occasionally brightens the incessant gloom to more of a twilight dusk. Her perception of time is as skewed as everything else, leaving her utterly without orientation, and with nothing else to fall back on she finds herself returning to the same inexorable conclusion. She doesn't actually have any hard evidence, no real proof, but something tells her they can't hide here forever. Whatever magic is keeping Castle Byers safe from the thing Will has dubbed the Demogorgon, Barb knows no fortress is impenetrable.

Will's pretty damn scared -- poor kid probably hasn't stopped being scared since he got here. But Barbara Holland hasn't won the hearts of Hawkins parents by being an ineffective sitter; not when she once talked Bobby Tanner's youngest out of a tree for his dentist appointment. Next to that, convincing Will they need to find their own way back is child's play. And once they establish who goes in which direction away from the castle to do their business, everything else is trivial.

It doesn't hurt when they're talking about the feasibility of fighting back. Will's face lights up like fireworks and he dashes over to his cot, rummages underneath and pulls out a rusty lockbox with a bent lid. But there inside is an actual pocketknife, with a locking handle and a blade over three inches long. Next to her lost nailfile, it might as well be Excalibur.

"You hold on to that." She smiles and gives his shoulder a squeeze. "If we're lucky, we won't need it."

strange fruit

Will hasn't eaten since the morning of the day he went missing. Still, when Barb shows him what she's been living on for the last four meals, his expected skepticism becomes full-blown disgust. She doesn't exactly blame him; hard enough convincing a kid to eat normal mushrooms, let alone ones in a hostile alien dimension. Hunger and indecision war until he finally screws up his courage and crams one whole into his mouth. Barb tries not to laugh but it's too much, she's barely smiled in all this madness and the last time was in savage triumph when she skewered a slug -- nearly a foot long, and covered in fur -- before it could execute its obviously planned attack on her bare foot. Will's face is showing obvious offense at her amusement, along with the expected reaction to the taste, plus the realization of literally biting off more than he can chew, and Barb sobers at the thought of having to perform the Heimlich before being sent off on fresh gales of laughter at his continuing facial contortions. He finally gets it down, looking like he won't forgive easily.

"I'm sorry." She can't help it. "But it *was* funny."

Will nods, his reluctance plain. She can tell something's still wrong, at least from his perspective. "What is it?"

"You're not supposed to eat anything in the realm of the fae." He's got that one hundred and eleven percent serious look. "Or you're trapped there. Forever."

"Honey, those are just stories." Barb strives for reassurance. "I don't

know what that thing is, but it's no fairy. And you and I --" She fixes him with a hard stare. "Are getting out of here."

strangeness

Since she sacrificed another piece of her shirt as a second bandana, they've managed to crudely map out a small zone around the clearing, using their precious single crayon to sketch it out on the back of one of Will's drawings. They've at least figured out that this place is in fact a dark mirror of their world, Castle Byers only being the most obvious manifestation. But Barb's fast reaching her limit, and she's ready to take a stab at finding the exit when her period finally arrives. Despite their mutual embarrassment at the ensuing awkward conversation, she feels it's her duty to at least explain the potential risk if her theory is correct. Knowing the possible increased likelihood of the beast tracking them, Will reluctantly concurs. Better to try than be trapped here for the rest of their lives. However long that might be.

They're almost ready. But before they pull the blanket aside, she kneels down for a pep talk.

"Just remember, I don't care how nasty this thing is. Back in our world? Human beings hunted sharks for thousands of years. With nothing more than pointy sticks."

Will nods, wide-eyed and solemn. Her mind whirls with fatalism as she berates herself for giving him false hope, for pretending her own confidence. Wild visions flit through her head of ropes and rocks, traps and fire and all other manner of things she doesn't have. Then he's holding something out, blinking like an owl as she stares at the knife in his hand.

"You keep it." Will swallows, and she's ready to say no but for the look in his eyes. Fear, certainly; but greater still is hope.

"Okay." Barb nods and accepts the blade, sticking it deep in her own pocket. "Let's go."

stranger with my face

After all that preparation, they can't decide which way. They end up doing Rock Paper Scissors, two out of three; it's Will's call, and he picks left, as determined by standing at the front door facing outward. Moments tick by as he stares forlornly at the castle, unwilling to leave his only refuge behind, until he finally turns and takes his first trudging, begrudging step.

It has to be hours later before she's finally willing to allow them a moment's rest. Will sinks into the bed of moss with a quiet grateful moan, and Barb makes a quick circle around their encampment. No sign of predators; plenty of the tasteless, oddly pungent mushrooms that are keeping them both on their feet. She used to like them on burgers. Now she never wants to see one again.

Will jerks upright as she approaches, relaxing as he sights her. His face is drawn and pinched, the dark circles plain under his eyes.

"Get some sleep." She pulls out the knife, making sure he sees. "It's okay."

He drifts off while she's still deciding whether to open the knife or leave it closed. But that strange girl with the shaven head is calling her name again, and Barb tries to answer but the sound is swallowed up by the void. All her cries unheard as the darkness closes in...

She comes awake at the scream of her name. Will is flailing in the arms of the monster as it disappears into the forest, and her petrification lasts half a heartbeat before she springs into motion, giving chase as best she can. It moves through the gnarled trees like a wraith, a single shadow among many, and Barb follows, her once clumsy trod grown fleet of foot as she dodges branches and puddles without looking down. Will's fallen silent, and her worst assumptions add further fuel to her pace.

She skids to a stop at the base of an enormous tree. It looms in her vision like a skyscraper, the ragged entrance into its hollow interior a pit of endless black. Barb hesitates the split of a second and then opens the knife, the firm and solid *click* sending a reassuring thrill

throughout her body.

The cramped passageway is like crawling back into the womb, all wet and glistening. She shoves away the sound of things going squish beneath her feet, elbows aside nightmarish visions that assail her from all sides. Tendrils dangle from above and caress her as she pushes onward, blade held out before her like a beacon in the night.

She stops and frowns. Like everything else, something is wrong here. No way can the tree be this big inside --

A chill breath raises the hackles on the back of her neck. She's already in motion, turning and sweeping the knife with as tight a grip as she can muster, and a gratifying howl is the result, its echoes amplified in the (tiny?) space around them.

"Will!" She strains to see beyond arm's reach, to no avail. "Where are you?"

No words come in reply. But she can hear it moving, again *away* from her, and a surge of righteous joy fills her heart. The shadows are shifting, revealing a pale light toward which the creature is scrambling. The shuffle of its tread is uneven, bringing further hope at the thought of this thing being injured. After everything they've been through?

She's out for blood.

She comes out of the darkness blinking, wiping a trail of slime from her face. The open space is perhaps a dozen steps across, a rough circle illuminated by some unknown source far above. Will is hanging from the wall, chin touching his chest, held in place by some sort of glutinous cobweb. The body of a dead deer lies to one side, more like *half* a body and it would be too much for her to take but she's already on overload, filing it away under one more horror.

The Demogorgon is ignoring her. This is the best view she's ever had, between the light and how slowly it's moving, a faceless ebony sliver that limps around Will putting the finishing touches on its web. Viscous fluid oozes from a row of neat punctures in its leg, and Barb swears she can smell the faint odor of frying meat.

"Whoever got you?" She allows herself a grim twist of the lip that's not quite a smile. "Good for them."

It turns that face without a face and roars, catching her off-balance. With Will's safety her primary concern, she finds herself torn on the best course of action just long enough. A mouth full of needles yawns wide as the Demogorgon takes hold of Will, jaws hovering a hair's breadth from his unconscious face, its nostrils flaring in deep inhalation. Barb is ready for death beyond all shadow of a doubt and yet she's paralyzed. Any second --

A savage growl, unlike any she's heard before; hunger, pain and desperation combined. And miracle of all miracles, the goddamn thing is retreating again, disappearing into another hole in the far wall and a surge of anger flares up at the thought of being cheated of her kill. She swallows it down, allowing a chill to settle over her thoughts as she waits for the sound of its movement to fade.

She's in the middle of tearing Will loose when he comes to. He struggles briefly until she calms him, enough to ask:

"Why didn't it eat us?"

He blinks in puzzlement, his fear momentarily forgotten.

"We've been here a while now. Breathing the air." A hint of trepidation reappears. "Eating the food."

truth is stranger

The exit from the other side is much closer, and they emerge from the tree after only five steps. The trail of blood is clear, the clawed footprints tearing up soft earth in their wake, and they set off in pursuit of her wounded prey with nothing but pure, clean vengeance to light the way.

From out of the night, a black hole appears. Barb stumbles to a halt before realizing she can see right through it, into the other side: A classroom filled with whirling debris, the faces of astonished boys in

the background. And that strange girl once again, blood trickling from her nose, fists clenched at her side as she stares at the hole in the world. The Demogorgon writhes, trapped in the portal, caught in her invisible grasp.

And now Barb understands. They'll never get back. But the world will be safe. If they can just close the gate...

The girl's eyes meet hers, and go wide with surprise.

It's okay, Barb thinks. And it really is, like it wouldn't have been before all this. She still doesn't want to die.

But at least she's ready for it.

No.

She blinks, her own surprise overwhelmed at the intensity of the single word reverberating in her consciousness.

WAIT

And she does. Waits, though every instinct screams to do something, *anything*.

The Demogorgon shrinks in on itself, collapsing into the black hole. Its wordless screams fade to silence.

And from the darkness, there comes a man.

"Jesus --" Sheriff Hopper fumbles at his belt, shoving the gun back in its holster. Then he's half-hugging, half-carrying her and Will over to the opaque membrane. They tear the hole wide, shove themselves through to fall upon the floor, trailing half-solid ropes of sticky fluid, and Barb barely notices the birthing canal close up behind them as they gaze down at Will, his breathing and color already noticeably improved.

"You did good, kid." Hopper swallows back tears, holding them both close to his heaving chest. "You did good."

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